
LAKE OKEECHOBEE IN-LAKE RESTORATION PROJECTS

Mandate:

Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP)
Lake Okeechobee Watershed Protection Program (LOWPP)

Background:

Lake restoration activities, which presently are funded by the Florida Legislature, address three distinct problems.

(1) Three islands at the southern end of the Lake (Ritta, Torry, and Kreamer) were ditched, diked and farmed from the 1920s until the 1970s. These activities resulted in damage to the native plant communities, introduction of exotic and invasive plants, and left the islands' marsh habitat isolated from the surrounding areas of the Lake, collectively degrading fish and wading bird habitat.

(2) In the late 1990s, high stages resulted in deposition of an organic berm along the western shoreline, cutting off hydrologic connections between the littoral zone and open water. This degraded valuable fish and wading bird habitat. In 2001, a section of the berm (from Indian Prairie to Pierce Canal) was removed with positive environmental benefits. Substantial stretches of berm remain in place and need to be removed.

(3) The 2000-01 drought and record low lake stage was followed by development of dense stands of cattail in South Bay and near Kings Bar. At some locations, cattail now has crowded out more desirable plant species, and this effect is likely to expand if left unchecked.

Project Overview:

Three restoration activities will address these problems.

(1) The District and Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation (FFWCC) will remove exotic vegetation and degrade perimeter berms on Torry, Kreamer, and Ritta Islands. Upland habitat will be left available for continued colonization by the federally endangered Okeechobee Gourd. The District and City of Belle also are clearing exotics and planting ~100 acres of native pond apple on Torry Island.

(2) The District and FFWCC plan to remove additional sections of the western shoreline berm. Current plans include removing the berm between Indian Prairie Canal and Horse Island, and scraping muck and reopening an area known as Cody's Cove located near the mouth of the Kissimmee River.

(3) The District will carry out herbicide treatments of cattail in South Bay and near King's Bar. Past experience in the Kissimee Chain of Lakes indicates that when cattail is controlled, recruitment of more desirable emergent macrophytes from the existing seedbank occurs.

Application of Results:

The combined effect of these restoration projects is to increase the quantity and quality of fish and wildlife habitat in Lake Okeechobee, with the concomitant potential to enhance beneficial uses of the lake by society (e.g., fishing, wildlife observation).